

This is the accepted version of a book review published in Journal of Agrarian Change Vol. 16 (4), 737-742
published by Wiley, available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/joac.12186/abstract>
Accepted version downloaded from SOAS Research Online: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/23127/>

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Labour state and society in rural India, by Jonathan Pattenden, Manchester:
Manchester University Press. 2016. Pp. xiv+192. £75 (hb). ISBN: 978-0-7190-8914-5.

This engaging and capillary analysis by Jonathan Pattenden focuses on evolving class relations in rural Karnataka, across villages located in the Raichur and Dharwad regions of India. The book is composed of nine chapters. After the introduction, chapters two and three, *A class-relational approach*, and *Labour, state and civil society in rural India*, elaborate on the theoretical framework deployed, inspired by Marxian insights, taking into consideration key debates around the political economy of India. Chapters four and five, *Changing dynamics of exploitation in rural South India* and *Dynamics of domination in rural South India*, present a rich field-based narrative of the different ways in which exploitation and oppression manifest in the areas studied. Chapter six and seven, *Social policy and class relations*, and *The neoliberalisation of civil society* explore the complex politics of social programmes, ranging from NREGA to different types of community-based engagements. Chapter eight presents evidence on *Organisations of labouring class women*, and chapter nine concludes the narrative.

The analysis elaborates on what Pattenden defines as a relational class approach to the analysis of poverty, its multidimensional character, and, most of all, its embeddedness in social relations and in processes of labouring. Through this approach, we see class as the outcome of multiple and intersecting social relations, rather than as a structural 'location' – that is, indeed we see Marx, and not Weber. Class is conceived as a plural identity, mediated by other forms of difference such as caste and gender. This particular take on class places this book in conversation with a number of other noteworthy scholarly works on India, for instance, by Barbara Harriss-White (e.g. 2003), Jan Breman (e.g. 1996; 2013), John Harriss (2013), Jens Lerche (e.g. 2010).

Moreover, it unmistakably places the book in conversation with Henry Bernstein's (2007; 2010) work on *classes of labour*, which many of us, that focus our research on the working poor, have found greatly inspiring, as it unpacks the great multiplicity of relations of exploitation faced by the informal proletariat under contemporary capitalism. Perhaps the author could have been less shy about his novel contribution to the 'classes of labour' debate. In fact, Pattenden's approach effectively enriches the conceptualisation of *classes of labour* in the context studied, by paying attention not only to relations 'in' and 'around' production, but also to what Harriss-White (2008; 2014) has defined as relations of distribution, involving the state, or the engagement of dominant classes with the state. These are often crucial to understand how the working poor are 'subsidized' in order to continue maintaining their harshly subordinated role (see Sinha, 2013), through a number of poverty reduction programmes that, effectively equate to a subsistence tax paid by the State to continue supporting

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capital. Crucially, unlike Kalyan Sanyal (2007), Pattenden brings this point home without having to theorise the reproduction of working poverty as lying outside of India's main accumulation pattern. The relevance of key forms of 'governmentality' through poverty reduction (Sanyal 2007) can indeed be acknowledged without necessarily embracing schemas embedded in dualist understandings of India's economy. This book testifies to that. Notably, also in this respect, this analysis is compatible with Jan Breman's work, particularly in relation to Breman's severe critique of dualist understandings of the Indian economy and society (see Breman's critique of Sanyal 2013).

Emphasising oppression and domination beyond the sole sphere of production, the book also deploys an interesting concept of 'exploitation', seen as including activities paving or maintaining processes of surplus extraction. According to Pattenden (p.29) exploitation manifests itself through 'direct' and 'indirect' forms, and across three distinct levels: 1) in and around production 2) through class-based organisations 3) through political institutions. This is to say that exploitation is not merely to be understood as an experience at the point of production. Rather, it is first and foremost a political – and, I would further add, a reproductive – experience. This is, in my view, original and field-informed Marx-inspired thinking, rejecting what Jairus Banaji (2010) has defined as 'forced abstractions' – where political economy categories are instead used in abstract and de-historicised ways, in rigid and ever-repeating schemas.

Novel approaches to exploitation from a contemporary, Marxian, non-orthodox standpoint are of vital importance. On the one hand, they are needed to continue showing the many distinct ways in which contemporary capitalism creatively subordinates working masses, deploying an extremely complex toolkit of production politics and institutional bio-politics (again, see Sinha 2013), whose features vary across the world system. On the other hand, in my view, they also serve the purpose of 'saving Marxism from itself'. For Pattenden, these novel approaches to exploitation may rescue Marxist analyses from the trap of structuralist, semi-relational analyses of class (à la Weber or Bordieau). For this reader, it is hoped that they may also rescue Marxist analyses from *some* of their stagist modernising *avatars*, in which exploitation is often reduced to productivity. For instance, this is the trap leading to the infamous 'better being exploited than not thesis', that Ray Kiely (2012) has defined as a 'Warrenite fantasy'. Exploitation, instead, cannot be trivialised and be reduced to a synonym for productivity levels. It is the process through which labour surplus is appropriated, but also through which – this analysis reminds us – 'labour is impoverished' (page 18) and it is exposed to harsh subordination. Ultimately, the political connotation of exploitation in subjugating labour to capital can never be dismissed as a 'secondary complication' in Marxian analyses. It has always been, and must remain, one of its fundamental aspects. The separation of the 'political' from the 'economic' sphere is a fiction produced by capitalism (Wood 1981). At the very least it shall not be reproduced by political economy analyses.

The class relational approach developed in this book, where both *classes of labour* and relations of domination are based on messy interplays between economic and political processes, relies on a combination of carefully collected fieldwork data over a period of over ten years, and secondary data analyses, in

line with the best political economy tradition. During these years, 39 villages have been surveyed and studied, through repeated visits and a multiplicity of methods. This is why, while giving justice to its sources of inspiration, the book is also able to boldly rework – and muck up a little – Marxian categories, on the basis of its key insights into the messiness of the relation of domination, exploitation and dispossession that characterise the Indian countryside. The book describes with astonishing vividness the deep processes of transformation at work across the Indian countryside, and the ways in which these give rise to multiple *classes of labour*, on the basis of interplays between past trajectories, geographical location, proximity to urban accumulation centres, occupational alternatives and possibilities for political mobilisation.

Through a careful reading of this analysis, we can appreciate the different processes of subjugation labour circulation implies, ranging from local agricultural production to long-distance migration and commuting. Different migration-circulation pathways entail different possibilities. For instance, workers from Raichur villages engage in construction work in Bengaluru, recruited through a chain of intermediaries that start in their villages, while workers from Dharwad villages commute to nearby cities to find different occupations. In villages where agriculture is still profitable, and where mechanisation is widespread, forms of labour un-freedom are still at work. Indeed, there are different ways in which labour can be controlled across all these different instances. The dominant classes also accumulate differently, not only by reinforcing their hold on certain types of production, but also, particularly where agriculture is not profitable, through infiltrating state structures, or engaging in processes of political gatekeeping, that are still greatly mediated by class and caste. Indeed, this analysis confirms how caste is not going anywhere soon, in India. It mediates access to non-agricultural employment, pathways of migration, as well as possibilities to accumulate, capital or power.

Gatekeeping itself, Pattenden brilliantly shows, is a complex enterprise, composed of many layers, with dominant classes and castes sitting at the top of the hierarchy, but with lower classes still coerced and co-opted into the system in a variety of ways, as a sort of menial army of political clientelism. For many, co-optation happens through privileged access to social programmes. This is to say that dominant classes ensure the reproduction of their gatekeeping army via granting them access to limited economic gains. Overall, different forms of coercion and co-optation emerge as the way in which dominant classes secure economic and political accumulation in an increasingly diversified countryside. In this light, the book describes accumulation as an economic and political project, in a process where ‘state relations and class formation are mutually constitutive’ (p. 108).

Crucially, while risking to be systematically hijacked by dominant classes, the book highlights how social programmes may also overhaul the established order and erode the power of elites, hence generating contradictory outcomes. But this depends once more on the balance of class forces, as social programmes are only likely to give rise to progressive outcomes where the labouring poor are involved in implementation, rather than where implementation is completely hijacked by elites. The book substantiates this argument by looking at the politics

of NREGA in the areas surveyed, as well as by looking at civil society and labour organisations. While NREGA gains are highly uneven based on the balance of class forces and civil society organisations (CSOs) - particularly in the form of Self-help groups (SHGs). Given that the latter simply tend to reproduce the power of elites and patterns of socio-economic inequality, organisations led by the working poor and labour activists - although still very weak in rural contexts - represent a real alternative for the poor working classes to reclaim development.

However, the analysis accepts that the ability of labour-based organisations to scale up and become a real alternative will depend in a large part on their ability to increase their share of resources from the state, which remains greatly pro-capital. The book remains unclear about realistic avenues towards this goal, and on the future feasibility of labour-led struggles targeting social programmes. Admittedly, this is hard to predict, particularly in the light of the many changes to social policy operated by the Modi government. For instance, this reader is left wondering about the implications of the acceleration of processes of primitive accumulation and dismantling of poverty-reducing efforts by the government. Quite provokingly put: may these paradoxically enhance the chances for pro-labour politics? If not, why not? I am hopeful the author will engage further with these issues in the future. In the meantime, however, *Labour, state and society in rural India: A class-relational approach* should be widely read. It significantly contributes to the study of the political economy of India. It also significantly contributes to our understanding of the distinct ways in which exploitation manifests itself today in practice in rural contexts. Hence, a rather diverse cohort of readers is likely to benefit greatly from this analysis.

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